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ABSTRACT

The goals of the Rochester (New York) Education Initiative are to inform the total community of the crisis of low academic achievement within the public school system, and to involve the total community in a set of strategies to correct the problem. Activities included the following: (1) meetings to solicit the support of key community leaders and groups; (2) "speakouts" to solicit the views of students, parents, and educators; (3) a conference to involve a broad cross-section of community leaders in the development of an action plan; (4) "town meetings" to bring to the public's attention those issues which were identified in earlier phases; and (5) activation of School Action Committees (SACs) to implement at least one identifiable project which they felt would substantially improve academic achievement in their schools. Specific programs described in the report include the following: (1) School Action Committees; (2) City-Wide Task Force; (3) Business Task Force; (4) business programs; (5) the Center for Educational Development (CED); (6) human service agency programs; (7) church programs; (8) college programs; (9) foundation involvement; and (10) city school district programs. It will take several years to determine the impact of the Initiative, but data from the Black Scholars program and the Early Recognition Program already indicate some improvement in minority achievement. A brief biography of each author is included. (FMW)

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A Community-wide Initiative to Improve the Quality of Education in the Rochester Public Schools: "E's Don't Stand for "Excellence"

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Since its founding in April 1965, the Urban League of Rochester has placed a high priority on the improvement of educational opportunity for Black and other minority students in the Rochester public schools. This concern has been actualized through direct services and advocacy activities over the past 22 years, as diverse as the offering of adult basic skills classes, recognition for students with high academic achievement, and a detailed proposal for reducing racial isolation in our urban schools. In stressing the necessity for a top quality education, the League believes that Black and other minority youth will not be able to achieve in the economic mainstream without these skills. It was out of this belief and the recognition that a crisis was on the community's doorstep that an activity of tremendous magnitude was launched which, looking back two years later, has had a profound impact on the entire community.

In 1985, as it entered the 20th anniversary year, the Urban League launched its Community-wide Initiative to Improve the Quality of Education in the Rochester Public Schools. This initiative was based on mounting evidence which indicated that Rochester was failing to meet the educational needs of its youth, the majority of whom were Black (59%) or Hispanic (11%). Of the 14,038 secondary school students enrolled in the Rochester City School District in 1983-84, 941 students were dropped or kicked out of school. By comparison, 1,273 graduated. Furthermore, only 35 of the black graduates in the class of 1984 had a "B" or higher average; and coaches reported that one third to one half of all students who went out for team sports were

disqualified because of their failure to maintain "C" averages as required by School District policy.

The Urban League of Rochester realized that education is the responsibility of the total community, and any serious attempt to address the crisis that we face in education must involve the total community. Therefore, the Rochester Education Initiative was launched with two primary objectives: (1) to inform the total community of the crisis of low academic achievement within the public school system; and (2) to involve the total community in a set of strategies to correct this problem.

THE URBAN LEAGUE OF ROCHESTER'S EDUCATION INITIATIVE

The plan to achieve these objectives included five phases of activity. In Phase I, meetings were held to solicit the support of key individuals and groups within the community. As a result of Phase I, 62 organizations had endorsed the Education Initiative by becoming co-sponsors, including religious, neighborhood, fraternal, business, human service, and governmental organizations. These groups participated in planning and implementing activities in the later phases of the Education Initiative.

Phase II involved the organization of three speakouts to solicit the views and concerns of the "key players" in the educational process: students, parents, and educators. Participants in the speakouts were invited to speak to the question "What can be done to improve the academic performance of Rochester's students?" A key element of cooperation was achieved with WXXI-TV, the local public television station, which agreed to videotape each speakout in its entirety, and from these hours of footage, to prepare exerpts which most dramatically focused on the concerns of the key players. The edited video was used at the leadership conference in June and the October Town Meetings.

Approximately 200 students from 11 secondary schools attended the Youth Speakout in April, 1985. Prior to addressing the central question, students used the platform to describe grievances which they felt are often ignored. This was a rare

opportunity for the students to talk candidly with the hope of getting a response to their concerns. Youth addressed topics such as magnet vs. comprehensive schools, student-teacher communication, conflict resolution, and counseling. The Parent Speakout was held in May, 1985. Prior to the event volunteers canvassed neighborhoods to survey parents' attitudes toward the schools and to encourage parents to attend the speakout. News releases and fliers were also distributed through the churches and schools to inform parents of the speakout. Approximately 250 parents participated in a four-hour session which raised many concerns and possible solutions. The Educators Speakout also was held in May. Educators from the City School District took the lead in organizing and implementing this program, and the nearly 100 participants made a diligent effort to focus on solutions rather than recriminations.

In Phase III, a conference, jointly sponsored by the Urban League and the University of Rochester, was held in June, 1985. The purpose of the conference was to involve a broad cross section of community leaders in the development of an action plan to address the problem of the large and growing number of young people who are failing in our city schools. About 150 key community leaders attended the conference. The conference charge was given by the President of the University, Dr. G. Dennis O'Brien; the President of the Urban League, William A. Johnson, Jr.; and the then Superintendent of the Rochester City School District, Dr. Laval S. Wilson. Statements of concern were presented by the Mayor, the president of the teachers' union, the president of the board of education, the executive director of the local anti-poverty agency, and a prominent business leader. Sol Hurwitz, the Senior Vice President for the Committee for Economic Development in New York City was the keynote speaker who focused on education collaboratives that had been undertaken in other communities. Videotaped highlights of the three speakouts were shown. At

the conclusion, most conferees stated that they had a greater sense of urgency about the educational crisis in the city's schools.

In Phase IV, twelve Town Meetings were held throughout the city on October 29, 1985. Neighborhood organizations and settlement houses were enlisted to act as lead agencies in setting up the meetings in the areas of the city that they serve. Prominent leaders from all sectors of the community made spot announcements which were used by local TV and radio stations to help promote the Town Meetings. In addition, the evening daily newspaper and a prominent weekly paper ran featured series of articles on public education issues.

The twelve "town meetings" built upon the momentum which had been generated and brought to the attention of the public those issues which were identified in earlier phases. The video highlights of the earlier speakouts and conference were used to stimulate group discussions. Participants were also given data about student achievement broken down by elementary and secondary enrollment. The initiative proposed "school-based action" committees, comprised of parents, educators, clergy, business persons, community residents, and, where appropriate, students, to serve as a vehicle for addressing and resolving the issues of performance and accountability. Participants were encouraged to join neighborhood-based Action Committees at the 45 schools within the city. Over 1,000 persons participated in the Town Meetings and close to 600 registered for School Action Committees.

Phase V involved the convening of the School Action Committees (SAC's) by the principal and a community volunteer. SAC's were charged with the task of launching at least one identifiable project which they felt would substantially improve academic achievement in their schools. Fact sheets listing suspensions, attendance and academic data for each school were provided to help committees identify specific areas of weakness in their school and determine what type of project they would

initiate. By the end of the first year, 35 of the 45 city public schools had selected, implemented and reported on school projects for the 1985-86 school year.

A City-wide Steering Committee was convened by the Urban League in April, 1986. The Steering Committee meets periodically and serves as a vehicle for SAC's to share information about their projects, to advocate for the replication of effective projects, and to assist in the identification of resources that SAC's may need to implement school-based projects.

Community Responses

As a result of the Rochester Education Initiative, a variety of activities were developed to address the problem of improving student achievement in Rochester's public schools. These activities were generated from a variety of sectors and involved various strategies. Oversight, advocacy and programs to improve academic performance occured at all levels including: School Action Committees, a City-Wide Task Force, and a Business Task Force. In addition, businesses, human service agencies, churches, colleges, foundations, and other community groups looked for ways they could improve the educational achievement of city youth. The following sections describe in more detail the activities which are occurring.

School Action Committees (SAC's). As noted above, the Urban League and its Education Initiative co-sponsors promoted the formation of building-based action committees at all city schools as an effective strategy to improve the academic achievement of students of each school. This strategy emphasized the importance of focusing attention at the school level and inviting all members of the school community to participate. It also acknowledged that needs and circumstances differ from school to school and that the neighborhoods and individuals who constitute each school community should determine what actions can best impact on the academic achievement of students in their school.

The first meetings of SAC's were convened in December, 1986. The development of SAC's varied by school. There was a diversity of participants, with some SAC's composed primarily of parents, others primarily of school staff. Most were a combination of both parents and staff with participation from residents, business persons, and/or community leaders. In some cases SAC volunteers joined already existing school improvement activities and parent groups. The SAC's developed their own unique organizational structures. Several formed subcommittees or task forces to work on particular issues. Some met as frequently as twice a month, while others met only three times during the school year. In order to provide ongoing encouragement and technical support, the Urban League obtained funding from several local foundations and corporations for a staff coordinator.

SAC projects reflected a variety of strategies to improve academic achievement. For example, SAC's in two elementary schools developed projects to increase reading skills of students; three different approaches for improving achievement through tutoring were initiated in elementary schools; and another project provided motivational activities for students achieving below their potential. Other projects focused on reducing student suspensions, improving attendance, increasing student and staff participation in the school, raising school spirit, or facilitating communication among staff, parents, and community through special events, workshops or newsletters.

The Urban League staff coordinator monitors the SAC activities. Some of the projects have been folded into the on-going activities of the school, either through the administration or parent group, while others have remained autonomous. The SAC initiatives are beginning to show some positive effects. In 1986-87, average daily attendance rates went up at least 1.5 percentage points in one school. This improvement in attendance occured through a series of incentives which were subsidized by local businesses, such as gift certificates from restaurants and plaques

for classes with the highest attendance. Another school has reduced the number of suspensions by 78 percent through the implementation of a plan developed by the School Action Committee. Urban League staff have conducted a survey of teachers and school administrators to evaluate the process by which the reduction in suspensions have occurred, and their report will be disseminated to other schools and interested parties.

City-Wide Task Force. In August, 1985, as a result of the leadership conference at the University of Rochester, a Task Force comprised of representatives from area colleges and universities, city government, schools (including the board of education), the media, churches, parents, fraternal organizations, and human service agencies was convened by the Urban League of Rochester and the local Center for Educational Development. In March, 1986, the Task Force issued its "Call to Action" report to the Community. The report acknowledged that there is a education crisis in the community, that "all of us share responsibility for the problem, and all of us can contribute to finding solutions." It recommended specific actions to be taken by the City School District, teachers, parents, students, the business community, community groups, human service agencies, cultural organizations, service organizations, religious institutions, colleges and universities, libraries, the City Department of Recreation and Community Services, and the media.

Recommendations were not restricted to programmatic appoaches to problems, but included recommended changes or new directions in institutional policies and changes in attitudes. Students were called on to "take control of your education ... ask for help of teachers after school, of tutors, of parents." Teachers were called on to "raise their sights about what they expect of their students" and "be willing to make home visits." Each governing body of human service, cultural, educational and service organizations was called on to "examine what it can do to enhance public education in Rochester, and work cooperatively to do so." More specific actions or program

approaches were also recommended, such as internship programs for new teachers and administrators, elimination of social promotions by the school district, and the provision of student interns to serve as classroom assistants by local colleges and universities.

A plan to oversee the implementation of the recommendations was presented in the report, which included the formation of a Community Roundtable. The Roundtable would serve as a mechanism for communication and coordination of activities initiated in response to the "Call to Action" and be comprised of representatives of all major community groups.

Under the heading, "We Call this Community to Action," the Times Union (the evening daily) published the entire text of the "Call to Action" report on the day it was released. Both television and radio also gave extensive coverage, which meant a large part of the metropolitan area was saturated with news of the Education Initiative. This high media profile generated a significant amount of activity from organizations and individuals.

Business Task Force. In September, 1985, the business community, through the Industrial Management Council and the Chamber of Commerce, formed a Business Task Force to "determine how business can best participate in the community-wide effort to assist Rochester's students to become productive participants in the comunity." After several months of study and visits to other cities where major efforts had been launched to involve the business community in addressing the problems of education, the Task Force released its report as part of the "Call to Action." The report acknowledged the importance of total community involvement in the Education Initiative, defined "areas of opportunity" for everyone in the community to participate and help students improve academically. It identified five tasks as the most effective responses that the business community could make to those "areas of cpportunity". The tasks included providing:

1. job placement opportunities as incentives for student performance;

2. partnerships between businesses and schools that would provide opportunities for interaction between employers/employees and students, faculty, and administrators at the school building level;

3. the marketing of education to raise the community's awareness of the importance of education and encourage participation in schooling by parents and others in the community;

4. assistance with staff development in the City School District; and

5. consultants from the business community to help with management/problem solving issues in the City School District.

Businesses. The Rochester business community's response to the Education Initiative and its "Call to Action" has been extremely positive. The business community established the Edu/Action Project in May, 1986 with a full time Director to oversee the implementation of the recommendations made in their task force report. A Jobs Collaborative Program was initiated at five secondary schools during the 1986-87 school year to provide students with pre-employment training, counseling and part-time jobs. The program will expand to a sixth secondary school in the 1987-88 school year.

Under the auspicies of the Ad Council of Rochester, a two-year marketing effort was launched. A Marketing Education Task Force, including some of the community's top communicators drawn from the public relations and marketing divisions of local corporations, will oversee the advertising campaign. In addition, an "umbrella" advertising agency will take the lead in developing and coordinating the implementation of a comprehensive marketing plan. The ad campaign is visible with "Rochester runs on brainpower -- Better education is everybody's job" billboards, and a television spot done in rap emphasizing the value of staying in school.

Several businesses have developed their own responses to the "Call to Action". Wegmans, a large, local supermarket chain, began a Work-Scholarship Connection

program. Under this program, Wegmans hires 14 or 15 year old city junior high students to work part-time as cashiers or clerks at one of their 25 Rochester-area stores. Since most of the stores are outside of the city, Wegmans provides transportation to and from work. Students have mentors who are store employees and sponsors (school employees) to monitor their progress in school and on the job. When participants graduate from high school, they are eligible for up to $5,000 per year for college tuition. As of fall, 1987, 50 students have participated in this program.

Marine Midland Bank has established a partnership with a secondary school which has a Business Magnet program. The program will provide jobs for students after school and during the summer in areas such as check processing, word processing and working as tellers. Other parts of the program will include college scholarships for graduates, speakers for school classes, "shadowing" programs in which a student follows a bank employee for a day at work, field trips, and training materials for teachers. Another bank, Rochester Community Savings Bank, has granted $10,000 to the City School District to finance field trips for students to cultural institutions and events.

The Eastman Kodak Company has been a most prominent and active supporter of the Education Initiative and the "Call to Action," from the beginning of these efforts. Kodak has contributed more than $35,000 to the League to underwrite some of the staff and programmatic costs of the initiative, and has encouraged several of its key staff to work on programmatic efforts. Additionally, the company has produced two quality video presentations that have been used locally and around the country, which graphically illustrate the success of the initiative.

The Center for Educational Development. The Center for Educational Development (CED) has facilitated the establishment of numerous partnerships between schools, businesses and other agencies and organizations that serve the Rochester area, including colleges, a health consortium, and state, county and city

parks departments. The Center for Educational Development is a not-for-profit organization setup to bring the resources and skills of the community-at-large into the process of educating city youth.

CED has also administered a mini-grant program designed to fund "innovative and enriching supplemental teaching efforts and learning activities that directly benefit students in Rochester's public schools." CED administered grants from local foundations which totaled approximately $34,000 in mini-grants during the 1985-86 school year and $27,750 in 1986-87. In 1987-88, CED will administer a $150,000 grant from the Gannett Foundation to support projects sponsored jointly by elementary and secondary schools which meet the needs of at-risk youth. CED also assumed responsibility for staffing the Community Roundtable on Education which has been charged with overseeing the implementation of recommendations made in the "Call to Action" report.

Human Service Agencies. Over 180 United Way-supported human service agencies, which manage programs that influence clients' "readiness to learn," banded together under Partners in Education to provide more cohesive services for Rochester youth and a better linkage between their agencies and the schools. Among the activities which have been initiated are a workshop by the Girls Scouts of Genesee Valley entitled "Successful Strategies for Involving Parents in Education," and an effort by a neighborhood group to involve parents in the development of an early childhood magnet at a local high school.

Churches. Religious institutions have responded to the "Call to Action" in a variety of ways. One church sponsored a series of workshops under the heading of "Christian Parent Involvement in Education". Other churches have initiated tutoring or enrichment programs that extend beyond their own congregations to other youth in need.

Colleges. Several area colleges have initiated programs that offer tutoring and counseling services to students in secondary schools. Others have become involved in efforts to improve teacher training both for students entering the profession and for practicing teachers. In addition to hosting the leadership conference, the University of Rochester sponsored a conference on how to improve the teaching profession and its workplace.

Foundations. Local foundations have been major factors in the success of the initiative. More than $50,000 has been given to the League since 1985 to underwwrite some of the staff and programmatic costs of the initiative. The Gannett, Daisy Marquis Jones, and the Rochester Area foundations, and the Gleason Memorial Fund have all actively participated. Additional funding was received from the Rochester-Monroe County Youth Bureau and Project Hometown America, a national competitive grant.

City School District. The City School District has acted on a number of the recommendations made in the "Call to Action" report. For example, a mentor teacher program was implemented in the 1986-87 school year, with 22 experienced teachers assigned to help 150 new teachers develop their classroom skills. Proposals to serve "at-risk" students were solicited from all secondary schools in the District and funds were made available for delivery of the proposed services during the 1986-87 school year. The 1987-88 school budget responds to of the concerns of the "Call to Action" report by including $2.5 million for programs to increase the ability of schools to meet students' needs, implement standardized district-wide curricula, and develop grade-level standards for students. The lobbying efforts of local officials, including the Mayor, brought additional budget dollars to the District for the expansion of services. In addition, the 1987 Rochester Teachers' Association contract incorporates several of the ideas advocated in the "Call to Action" report including home-based guidance which involves more counseling activities by teachers and more communication with parents, elimination of the seniority system as a basis for teacher assignments so that

more experienced teachers can be assigned to the students with greater need, and more in-service time for teachers at the beginning and the end of the school year.

There have been numerous other responses to the "Call to Action" by large and small organizations and individual citizens. It is impossible to keep track of all of those responses and difficult to know all of the plans being made or new approaches being explored. The City School District itself is large and complex. It includes 45 schools and serves over 30,000 students. As demonstrated by the examples above, however, it is safe to say that the Education Initiative has achieved its objective of involving the total community in addressing the crisis we face in educating Rochester's youth.

REFLECTIONS

As we look back over the past two years, it is worthwhile to try to identify those factors that may have contributed most significantly toward achieving broad community involvement in the Education Initiative. The first factor to consider is leadership. The Urban League is respected by a broad section of the community and has an extensive history of addressing community issues. The personal involvement and committment of key board and staff members to the Education Initiative was a significant factor in its success. Two vice-chairs of the board took leadership roles in the initiative: one was instrumental in the League's efforts to mobilize the community from the inception of the initiative through the Town Meetings; and the other chaired the task force which developed the "Call to Action" report and the Community Roundtable. It is not an exaggeration to say that a massive staff effort was also involved in the initiative. In addition to League staff contributing in various ways from assembling packets to hosting at speakouts and conferences, six top managers comprised a work group which operated throughout the first year to insure the success of every phase of the Education Initiative.

In addition, the involvement of business executives, including the presidents of several large corporations in Rochester, was undoubtedly a factor in the successful

involvement of the business community. The cooperation and commitment of the two school superintendents who have served since the initiative got underway, the school board, and the president of the teachers' union to the Education Initiative have also been crucial to involving other community institutions. Opposition or obstructionism by the school district or the union would have made the broad mobilization of the community extremely difficult, if not impossible.

Another factor important in convincing the community that there was a crisis in education in Rochester which motivated so many individuals and groups to act, was the availability of clear-cut data on student performance from the City School District. The City School District's system of collecting, compiling and publishing data on student characteristics and performance has provided and will continue to provide a strong tool for the community to evaluate student achievement. Additional data available through the Urban League's **Black Scholars** Program served to dramatize the problem even more and is an additional evaluative check on the progress of the initiative.

The final factor is the concerted effort that was made by community leaders and educators not to point fingers of blame at each other or other community groups for the crisis that was faced. Attention and energies were been directed to responding to the questions "What can I do?" and "What can we do to improve the academic achievement of students?" This approach to the problem has helped reduce some of the barriers and tensions that often make it difficult for school staff, parents, and other community groups to work together for the benefit of the students.

Impact of Initiative on Student Achievement

In October, 1986, the Urban League had a second Town Meeting and a third is scheduled for 1987. These meetings are to report back to the community on the status of student achievement in the City School District and provide an opportunity for SAC's to display and share information about the projects that they had implemented

during the school year. Updated fact sheets with indicators of student achievement at the end of the first year did not show significant improvement in student achievement levels. At the time this article was prepared, the fact sheets were not available for the 1986-87 school year; however, there have been some signs of success. The number of **Black Scholars** who graduated from city schools increased: from 35 in the class of 1984, 23 in 1985, and 32 in 1986 to 62 in 1987. In addition, the number of Black students identified by the Urban League's Early Recognition Program (students who have B or higher averages in the 9th, 10th and 11th grades) went from 226 in 1986 to 346 in 1987.

The task of improving the quality of education for our youth is not a short and easy one. The success that has been achieved in raising the conciousness of the commmunity about the crisis that we face in education and involving such a broad section of community in activities designed to resolve the crisis is obvious. It will take several years, however, to determine the impact of these activities on student achievement; however, the data on the Urban League's **Black Scholars** and Early Recognition students are hopeful signs.

As of this writing, Rochester was one of ten cities competing for five grants from the Annie E. Casey Foundation of $10 million per city spread over five years. These grants provide an inducement to communities to effect new intervention strategies targetted to "at risk" youth. Because of the collaborative activities which have already taken place through the Education Initiative, Rochester was ideally situated to compete successfully for the grant. All of these experiences bode well for a community that is seriously committed to improving the quality of education for all of its students.

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSES OF AUTHORS

William A. Johnson, Jr., is President and Chief Executive Officer of the Urban League of Rochester, New York, Inc. M.A., political science from Howard University. Since December, 1972, he has been the President and CEO of the Urban League of Rochester. He is also the President of the Urban League of Rochester Economic Development Corporation, a subsidiary formed in 1985 to develop profit-making ventures. Mr. Johnson has served on a number of boards and received numerous government appointments. He has published a number of essays on contemporary local and national issues and periodically writes for local newspapers. Among the more than two dozen awards and honors he has received are: the Vernon E. Jordan, Jr. Fellowship to study advanced management techniques at Harvard University; "Executive of the Year" (1979) by the United Way of Rochester; and the Rochester Chamber of Commerce's Civic Award for Social Services (1982) and Education (1986).

Betty Dwyer, Manager, Education Initiative, Urban League of Rochester, New York, Inc. B.A., philosophy and history from the University of Toronto. She has been employed at the Urban League since 1977. Prior to taking on the responsibility of overseeing Education Initiative activities, she has served in various managerial roles in the areas of employment preparation and training, adult basic education and energy conservation. Ms. Dwyer has also spent 10 years at a local anti-poverty agency where she was involved in community organization and advocacy in the areas of education, housing, health, and social services.

Joan Z. Spade, Research Associate, Urban League of Rochester, New York, Inc. and Adjunct Assistant Professor at the State University College at Brockport. Ph.D. in sociology from the State University of New York at Buffalo. For the past two years, she has been involved in program planning and research activities at the Urban League of Rochester. She has published several articles in the areas of education and family.